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Helping Students Improve Their Own Writing: The Self-Conference Sheet

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AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO HELP HISTORY STUDENTS improve their research papers and essays is to provide them with a self-conference sheet. This sheet is very simple in format, using straight-forward questions to focus attention on organization. The self-conference sheet is meant to be attached to the final draft when it is submitted. It may be used as part of a peer review process¹ or alone to help students independently assess their own written work. A self-conference sheet compels students to review their own work at least once before their final version is complete. I have found these sheets to be equally successful with the juniors and seniors in my history of science classes and the freshmen and sophomores in my European civilization classes. An example of the sheet follows:

Self-Conference Sheet - History Paper - Mr. Steffens

Please consider these questions carefully as you re-read your draft. Write on the back of this sheet if necessary:

1. Does my title describe my topic/thesis/major hypothesis exactly? (**Write down** your title below.)

2. Have I stated the topic/thesis/major hypothesis of my paper clearly in the first paragraph or on the first page? (**Write down** below the exact sentence or sentences which give your reader an immediate grasp of your topic/thesis/major hypothesis.)

3. What do I really want my reader to understand about my topic? (**Write down** below a brief statement of your major point. Please note that these three questions should be clearly and closely related.)

Author's Name: _____

There are a variety of ways to use this self-conference sheet, depending upon the size of the class and the amount of time that the instructor has available. If there is a first draft built into the writing assignment, I have found that additional questions, as prompts or reminders, are useful. My most successful prompts have been:

- * Check to see that you have used specific examples. It is helpful to have specific examples on every page illustrating each general point you make. Your reader needs examples of what you are claiming to fully understand what you mean.
- * Re-read your draft to yourself out loud. This is often the best way for you to help yourself revise your own piece of writing. Is there a clear direction to your draft? Is it headed towards your conclusion?
- * Is your conclusion strong and concise or does it sound too mushy and general? Does your conclusion relate directly to your title and thesis statement?

* What questions do you have for your peer reviewers? What would you most like help with in the revision of this draft?

My students have appreciated the self-conference sheets that they are required to complete for each of my assignments. These sheets are easily adapted to each specific writing assignment. While students complete them because it is required, they discover, as they work, that they can independently revise and improve their own writing. This is a source of personal satisfaction for them, and I am pleased that their finished pieces reflect more thoughtful organization.

Notes

1. For a full description of the peer review process and the use of the process approach to designing writing assignments, see: Henry Steffens, "Designing Writing Assignments for Student Success," *The Social Studies* (March/April 1989), 59-63.